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Confucius' Thoughts on *Shi* 食 in *The Analects of Confucius*

1. Introduction

There is an old saying in China that food is the heaven for the people. In Chinese culture, *shi* 食 plays a very important role. It is not only about the food that help people sustain life everyday, but also shows a kind of attitude to life for ancient Chinese. Therefore, I will translate this Chinese character *shi* to English word as 'Diet' rather than the simply meaning - 'Food'. From the Qin dynasty, numerous classical books have talked about the effects and meaning of diet from lots of different aspects, such as health preservation, cuisine and politics.

The Xiang Dang chapter in *The Analects of Confucius* is known as one of the most famous texts for discussing the concept of diet. The chapter introduces various matters need attention in using of food. Although these details related to eating food have been elaborated very clearly in this chapter, the fact is that the character *shi* has a rich meaning and it does not merely represent edible food but also about some more important and meaningful dietary concepts. As a result, this essay aims to explore a more comprehensive significance of diet in Confucius' thoughts through the entire *Analects of Confucius* instead of focusing on a single chapter.

1.1 Literature review

Previous scholars' discussions on the dietary views of Confucius recorded in *The Analects of Confucius* are also numerous. In terms of their main arguments and contents, these articles could be divided into three categories. The first type discusses the meaning of diet through only one aspect in Xiang Dang chapter, matters need attention in using of food, which is impossible to include the full picture of Confucius' dietary thoughts. This category is exemplified by Song Yecao's Analysis on Eating Regimen of Confucius¹ and Xing Xiangchen's On Confucius's Conception of Healthy Diet². The second type of articles, although breaking free from the constraints of the Xiang Dang chapter, they merely focus on single aspect of dietary views in the entire book, such as Xu Ningning's Exploration on

¹ Song Yecao 宋野草, 'Analysis on Eating Regimen of Confucius', *Shangqiu zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao* 商丘職業技術學院學報, 4(2013), pp. 4-5.

² Xing Xiangchen 邢湘臣, 'On Confucius's Conception of Healthy Diet', *Sichuan pengren gaodeng zhuanke xuexiao xuebao* 四川烹飪高等專科學校學報, 6(2012), pp. 17-23.

Pursuit of Food and Learning - Life Value Pursuit of Confucius³ and Zhang Zhongyu's Textual Research of 'Lirang' and 'Qushi' in the Analects - with Comment on Confucian Political Ideals⁴. The last type of articles not only look through the entire book but also explore several aspects of dietary views rather than talking about the single one. However, perhaps due to space limitations, the interpretation of the views is not detailed enough and some aspects were overlooked. This category is exemplified by Wang Lin's An Analysis of the Cultural Connotation of 'Food' in The Analects of Confucius.⁵

1.2 Methodology

Based on these three categories of articles, this essay will try to conduct a relatively comprehensive exploration of diet in Confucius' thoughts through a close reading of the entire book and reference to various commentaries and scientific evidences. It will be discussed in three aspects: 'a scientific and healthy dietary view', 'rituals and etiquette of diet' and 'the relationship between diet and Dao(道)'

2. A Scientific and Healthy Dietary View

This chapter mainly discusses the details that Confucius suggested about the matters of food and eating which is included in the Xiang Dang chapter. A number of scholars have interpreted this aspect based on various ancient annotations to prove that Confucius' dietary views is scientific and healthy. However, it is difficult to demonstrate this point very scientifically without any scientific evidences. Hence this part will discuss the concept, Confucius' scientific and healthy dietary view, from a multi-faceted perspective by combining annotations with scientific data. The following are several examples.

2.1 Having refined rice and tiny meat cubes

In the Xiang Dang chapter, it said, '食不厭精，膾不厭細', which means that 'In his food, he liked to have the rice finely cleaned and the meat, when stewed, cut in small pieces.'⁶ Then Zhu Xi's(朱熹) commentary is '食精則能養人，膾麤則能害人' which means 'Having the

³ Xu Ningning 許寧寧, 'Exploration on Pursuit of Food and Learning - Life Value Pursuit of Confucius', *Hubei zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao* 湖北職業技術學院學報, 4(2014), pp.79-81.

⁴ Zhang Zhongyu 張中宇, 'Textual Research of 'Lirang' and 'Qushi' in the Analects - with Comment on Confucian Political Ideals', *Chongqing shifan daxue xuebao* 重慶師範大學學報, 6(2018), pp. 47-54.

⁵ Wang Lin 王林, 'An Analysis of the Cultural Connotation of 'Food' in The Analects of Confucius', *Sichuan luyou xueyuan xuebao* 四川旅遊學院學報, 1(2022), pp.12-16.

⁶ Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘, Xu Changqiang 徐昌強 and Ouyang Jin 歐陽瑾, *Gu Hongming yilunyu daxue zhongyong* 辜鴻銘譯論語大學中庸 (Beijing: Beijing gongye daxue chubanshe, 2017), p.123.

finely cleaned rice is good for health and having the large pieces of meat will take a toll on health.’ He helped to explain the reason why Confucius said so.

Some digging around in scientific evidences revealed that this kind of view is in accord with scientific principles. In October 2025, American scholar Marlene Geiger published an article named *Tender vs Less Tender Cuts of Meat* in IOWA States University Extension and Outreach. She points out that, ‘Collagen can also be made less tough by slicing meat into smaller pieces, making the fibers smaller and easier to break apart.’⁷

Moreover, Marlene Geiger have also studied about the appropriate temperature for cooking food. She found that ‘For cuts that are high in collagen (less-tender cuts), cooking low and slow with moisture, such as stewing or braising, is the best method. Low-temperature cooking is anything at or below 325°F (163°C).’⁸ She also attached a chart that include the optimal cooking temperatures for various food below her article. This discovery could prove Confucius’ emphasis on cooking temperature, ‘He must not eat what is overcooked nor what is undercooked’.⁹

2.2 Not eat anything discoloured or that smells bad¹⁰

Confucius have also given some methods to determine whether the fish and meat has gone bad. In the Xiang Dang chapter, it said, ‘色惡,不食.臭惡,不食’, which means, ‘ He did not eat food that had gone off colour or food that had a bad smell.’¹¹ This point can also be proved by science.

The World Health Organization issued the ‘Code of Practice for Fish and Fishery Products’ in year 2021. On page 126 of this handbook, it clearly states, ‘The best method of assessing the freshness or spoilage of fish is by sensory evaluation techniques.’¹² It provides a detailed explanation of what characteristics in fish mean it is unacceptable. For instance, when fish goes bad, its skin will look dull and change to gritty colours with yellow-brown dotting slime. At the meantime, it will have special odour such as flesh odour amines smell,

⁷ Marlene Geiger, ‘Tender vs Less Tender Cuts of Meat’ (2025) <<https://blogs.extension.iastate.edu/answerline/2025/10/21/tender-vs-less-tender-cuts-of-meat-2/>> [accessed 19 January 2026].

⁸ Marlene Geiger, ‘Tender vs Less Tender Cuts of Meat’ (2025)

⁹ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 and Wei Li 韋利, *Lunyu hanying duizhao* 論語漢英對照 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999) p.105.

¹⁰ Yang Bojun and Wei Li, *Lunyu hanying duizhao*, p.105.

¹¹ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans by DC Lau, (The Chinese University Press, 1979), p. 91.

¹² World Health Organization, Code of Practice for Fish and Fishery Products (2021) <<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240013179>> [accessed 19 January 2026].

ammonia smell, milky lactic smell, etc.¹³

2.3 Avoid excess meat

In the Xiang Dang chapter, it said, ‘肉雖多,不使勝食氣’, which means, ‘Although there might be plenty of meat on the table, he would never allow the quantity of meat he took to exceed a due proportion to the rice he took’¹⁴. Even though meat can supply nutrients for the body, it is undesirable to consume excessive amounts of meat. It is not good for our physical health. The British National Health Service (NHS) points out that ‘Eating too much processed meat and red meat probably increases your risk of bowel (colorectal) cancer. If you currently eat more than 90g (cooked weight) of red or processed meat a day, it is recommended that you cut down to 70g¹⁵’.

From the above examples, it is clear see that Confucius’ views on healthy eating thousands of years ago are highly scientific and are still applicable today.

3. Rituals and Etiquette of Diet

As we mentioned in the introduction, the discussion of diet in *The Analects of Confucius* is not merely about the matters need attention in using of food. It includes concepts across various aspects. As a result, this part will explore another aspect of Confucius’ dietary views in *The Analects of Confucius*, rituals and etiquette of diet.

Li Yun, *The Records of Rites* says, ‘夫禮之初始諸飲食’, which means ‘At the first use of ceremonies, they began with meat and drink.’¹⁶ Diet is not only the basis of human living, but also the fountainhead of human civilization especially in the rituals and etiquette. In addition, Confucius also attached importance to the rituals and etiquette. He emphasizes many times that it is necessary to integrate them with people’s daily life in *The Analects of Confucius*, such as ‘Look not at what is contrary to propriety’, ‘Listen not to what is contrary to propriety’, ‘Speak not what is contrary to propriety’¹⁷, etc. As a result, he would certainly attach the importance to combine the rituals with diet. The following examples will show how Confucius combine these two points.

¹³ World Health Organization, Code of Practice for Fish and Fishery Products, 2021.

¹⁴ Gu Hongming, Xu Changqiang and Ouyang Jin, *Gu Hongming yilunyu daxue zhongyong*, p.123.

¹⁵ National Health Service, Meat in your diet, <<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-types/meat-nutrition/>> [accessed 19 January 2026].

¹⁶ Translated by James Legge, Zhongguo zhexue dianzihua jihua 中國哲學書電子化計劃 <<https://ctext.org/zh>> [accessed 19 January 2026].

¹⁷ Translated by James Legge, Zhongguo zhexue dianzihua jihua.

3.1 Interacting with the Lord

The Xiang Dang chapter records some dietary etiquette when Confucius was interacting with the Lord. ‘When his lord gave a gift of cooked food, the first thing he invariably did was to taste it after having adjusted his mat’¹⁸, this kind of actions manifested Confucius’ reverence for the Lord. ‘When his lord gave him a gift of a live animal, he invariably reared it’¹⁹, such acts manifested Confucius’ gratefulness for the Lord. This kind of gratefulness just like what Zhu Xi interpreted, ‘仁君之惠，無故不敢殺也’，which means Confucius was deeply grateful for his lord’s gift and he would treat the gift well. Another dietary etiquette is that ‘When he had the honour to sit with his prince at table, after the prince had said grace he would first taste the dishes’²⁰. This kind of actions show not only Confucius’ respect to his Lord, but also show his concern to his Lord’s safe.

3.2 Interacting with one’s parents

The second kind of dietary etiquette is manifested in interacting with one’s parents. A disciple of Confucius once asked him about the duty of a good son in the chapter of Wei Zheng(為政). Confucius replied that, ‘Filial piety does not consist merely in young people undertaking the hard work, when anything has to be done, or serving their elders first with wine and food.’²¹ Although the main topic of this sentence is talk about the genuine concept of Filial piety which is about complying with the wishes of one’s parents rather than providing the great food and drink, we can find that serving those elders first is the underlying logic. It means that serving one’s parents first is the common etiquette (which is also a kind of dietary etiquette) that everyone should conduct, though it could not be regarded as Filial piety.

3.3 During Sacrifices

Confucianist attaches great importance to sacrifice. In *The Analects of Confucius*, Confucius actually often discusses diet and sacrifices together then put diet as a symbol for expressing people’s deep reverence and gratefulness to sacrifice. For example, when ancient people would conduct a sacrificial ceremony, their diet should abstain from meat and wine several days in advance. This kind of dietary etiquette, is included in the Xiang Dang chapter: ‘On

¹⁸ The original text is, ‘君賜食，必正席先嘗之’ trans by DC Lau, (The Chinese University Press, 1979), p. 93.

¹⁹ The original text is, ‘君賜生，必畜之’ trans by DC Lau, (The Chinese University Press, 1979), p. 93.

²⁰ The original text is, ‘侍食於君，君祭，先飯’ Gu Hongming, Xu Changqiang and Ouyang Jin, *Gu Hongming yilunyu daxue zhongyong*, p.125.

²¹ The original text is, ‘有事弟子服其勞，有酒食先生饌，曾是以為孝乎？’ Yang Bojun and Wei Li, *Lunyu hanying duizhao*, p.13.

such days he should always change the ordinary articles of his food'²², enable people to keep their body and mind clean and free from the desire of food in turn to involve the sacrifices with pure mind and deep reverence.

Furthermore, the etiquette '雖疏食菜羹瓜,祭,必齊如也' which means: 'Even when a meal consisted only of coarse rice and vegetable broth, he(Confucius) invariably made an offering from them and invariably did so solemnly'²³ is also a way of putting the sincere and respectful attitude for sacrifices into practice through the dietary etiquette in daily life.

From the above analysis, it is easy to see that diet is closely linked to rituals and etiquette in Confucius' views and those dietary etiquette plays a very important role in Confucius' thoughts.

4. The Relationship between Diet and Dao(道)

Mo Zi(墨子), a thinker in the early Warring States Period, has stated that confucians always pursues delicious food and indulges in it instead of working hard.²⁴ This kind of opinion perhaps due to his misunderstanding or perhaps he had seen some confucians once went against Confucius' teachings. Because after digging around in *The Analects of Confucius*, we can find that Confucius has not ever taught his disciple pursue the enjoyment of food and give up the study of Dao. On the contrary, Confucius emphasizes that when diet meets Dao, the noble person should invariably stand by the Dao more than once. Therefore, the following examples will reveal the genuine thoughts of Confucius in the relationship between diet and Dao.

The first example is from the Xue Er chapter, Confucius says, 'A wise and good man, in matters of food, should never seek to indulge his appetite; in lodging, he should not be too solicitous of comfort'²⁵. *Lunyu Zhushu* (論語注疏) explains: '學者之志,樂道忘飢,故不暇求其安飽也'²⁶ which means that the noble persons who are eager to study the Dao well should spend almost all of his effort focusing on the study of Dao. If they had such conception, they would have no time to think about the enjoyment of delicious food. Those people devote

²² The original text is, '齊必變食' Gu Hongming, Xu Changqiang and Ouyang Jin, *Gu Hongming yilunyu daxue zhongyong*, p.122.

²³ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans by DC Lau, p. 91.

²⁴ The original text is, '貪於飲食, 惰於作務', translated by myself.

²⁵ The original text is, '君子食無求飽, 居無求安' Gu Hongming, Xu Changqiang and Ouyang Jin, *Gu Hongming yilunyu daxue zhongyong*, p.11.

²⁶ He Yan 何晏, Xing Bing 邢昺, *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏, (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2011), p.8.

most of their time to study will not only remain unaffected by other things, but also even forget about hunger. How could there be any leisure time for them to pursue the enjoyment?

The second example is recorded in Shu Er(述而) chapter, Confucius says, ‘In the eating of coarse food and the drinking of water, the using of one’s elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found.’²⁷ Does this sentence mean that Confucius enjoys coarse food and does not like refined food? As we mentioned in the second section, a scientific and healthy dietary view, we had figured out that Confucius attached great importance to the food refinement. So the true meaning of this sentence aligns with what *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu* states: Confucius did not intend to value coarse food; instead, his view was that the study of Dao filled him with inner peace and joy, which remained unaffected by simple food.²⁸

In Yong Ye chapter, there is another sentence that Confucius praised Yan Hui(顏回) has the similar meaning with this sentence in Shu Er, it says, ‘Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find insupportable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy.’²⁹ Confucius also remarked in Li Ren chapter, ‘It is useless to speak to a gentleman who wants to give himself up to serious studies and who yet is ashamed because of his poor food or bad clothes.’³⁰

Through the above exploration, it is clear to see that although Confucius had very scientific dietary views, knew how to select good ingredients, and also valued the etiquette of diet, this does not mean that he taught his disciples to indulge in food. On the contrary, when diet meets Dao, he always firmly stood by Dao. In addition, this choice does not mean that Confucius avoided or resisted refined food. It is more like a decision made by the noble person when faced with the dilemma of choosing between food and Dao(also known as profit and Dao).

4. Conclusion

This essay explores and analyses Confucius’ thoughts on diet in the entire book of *The*

²⁷ The original text is, ‘飯疏食飲水，曲肱而枕之，樂亦在其中矣’ trans by DC Lau, (The Chinese University Press, 1979), p. 61.

²⁸ The original text is, ‘非樂疏食飲水也，雖疏食飲水，不能改其樂也’. Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), p. 97.

²⁹ The original text is, ‘一簞食，一瓢飲，在陋巷。人不堪其憂，回也不改其樂’ trans by DC Lau, (The Chinese University Press, 1979), p. 49.

³⁰ The original text is, ‘士志於道，而恥惡衣惡食者，未足與議也’ Gu Hongming, Xu Changqiang and Ouyang Jin, *Gu Hongming yilunyu daxue zhongyong*, p.41.

Analects of Confucius with the combination of ancient commentaries and modern scientific evidences. These views can be divided into three aspects.

The first one is Confucius' scientific and healthy dietary view. Through integrating scientific data with ancient commentaries, we can clearly see that this kind of dietary view (such as having refined rice and tiny meat cubes) is very scientific and is fully aligned with scientific principles.

The second aspect is that Confucius attached great importance to observing the dietary etiquette. He took the diet as a medium to express reverence and gratefulness, and there was a serious of dietary etiquette observed when interacting with Lord, parents and during sacrifices.

The final one is that Confucius gave a clear opinion about the relationship between diet and Dao. Under some circumstances, food also be served as a tool to verify whether a noble person is dedicated to pursuing the Dao. If the noble person is eager to learning Dao but his resolve still would be shaken by food, it is prove that his will is not firm enough. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the noble person must refuse delicious food. Confucius just wanted to exhort his disciples do not let their will to pursue Dao be shaken.

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